

Christmas homilies can be a little bit tricky for me, especially when I know it is a season of suffering for a lot of people; my original attempt at this was a bit on the dark side. You were probably going to ask me what caused my heart to shrink three sizes and tell me that I had ruined Christmas forever. Then I was given two gifts. The second gift was a framed picture from an anonymous gift-giver which confirmed an impulse for a little bit lighter homily inspired by the first gift. The first gift was a birthday gift. When the person handed it to me, she said, "I hope this helps you with your homilies." To which I said, "thank you...wait, what do you mean?" I pulled the gift out of the bag expecting a collection of theological reflections—which would have been great; those are always welcome—but instead I found a collection of Star Wars and Captain America comics. The second gift—the picture—I thought was going to be a picture of Jesus or Mary or one of the saints; what else do you give to a priest? Instead it was Captain America and across the bottom of it was written: "Never seen in the same room together: Clark Kent and Superman, Batman and Bruce Wayne, Captain America and Fr Brent." To whoever gave me that gift, thank you; you probably saved Christmas. If that is how you guys want me to improve my homilies, I am happy to oblige.

Every year we go in search of the perfect Christmas. Hollywood gives us lots of images of what the perfect Christmas "should" look like and many of the best Christmas movies and tv shows wrestle with this search. One of my favorites is National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation in which Clark Griswold goes way overboard in his search for the perfect Griswold family Christmas with hilariously disastrous results. A more recent favorite is the Marvel tv miniseries Hawkeye. The Avenger Hawkeye/Clint Barton is in New York City with his kids, when a young woman, Kate Bishop, accidentally reawakens a part of Clint's violent past. Clint sends the kids home to safety while he stays in New York to help Kate and bury his past—all the while wanting to be home with his family. Both of these movies show our struggle and angst as we search for the perfect Christmas while being forced to deal with the messy situations of life; both of them also leave out the one thing that can truly make Christmas perfect.

The third movie includes that one thing, although in a very strange way. In the Guardians of the Galaxy Holiday Special two of the Guardians, Drax and Mantis, are in Hollywood looking for what they consider to be the perfect Christmas gift for their depressed friend, Peter Quill aka Star Lord. Drax and Mantis are aliens and their idea of the perfect Christmas is a bit confused. Everything they learned about Christmas they learned from a talking raccoon who learned it from a telepathic Russian cosmo-dog who learned it from a space

pirate who learned it from Peter Quill, himself, whom the space pirates abducted from earth when he was a little boy. Pete's memories of Christmas on earth are a bit messed up.

While wandering through everything you would expect in a Hollywood Christmas, Drax and Mantis stumble upon a nativity scene. There is a pause as they look at it and then they walk away a little bit confused, probably asking: "What does that have to do with Christmas?" I may be reading too much into this, but I think that very short scene is a subtle jab at our search for the perfect Christmas if that search focuses on consumerism and the commercialization of Christmas. If that is what makes up the perfect Christmas, it is no wonder we might find ourselves crying out like Charlie Brown: "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?"

At which point Linus steps onto the stage with his blanket and tells us that if we want the perfect Christmas, our starting place has to be right over there [the nativity scene]; without that baby, **without Jesus, there is no Christmas**. Think about that though. Where are they? In a stable; in Bethlehem it is more likely they were in a cave. Caves are usually cold and damp. They have spiders and bats in them. If animals have been living in them, they probably smell. Mary just gave birth so she has to be tired. Both Mary and Joseph are tired from their long journey. There is no bathtub so they are probably dirty. Then there is Jesus himself—the divine son of God, through whom all things were made—yet there he is: a newborn baby, lying in a manger, wrapped in cloth, totally dependent on his parents and other creatures for his survival. The creator of everything is now among the poorest of the poor in the midst of a very messy world. Yet that right there is the perfect Christmas because everyone is completely focused on Jesus.

Sometimes our efforts for the perfect Christmas cause us to try to cover up and ignore the messiness of our lives, including our grief. Jesus entered into that messiness so that he can walk beside us and support us and redeem us and our messy world. Elaborate decorations, beautiful Christmas trees, gifts and gathering with family and friends are good and we should enjoy them but they are just icing on the cake; all we really need for a perfect Christmas is Jesus.

Christmas is not just one day. This year it officially goes until January 8th, but that doesn't mean on January 9th we can take our focus off of Jesus. In the traditional liturgical calendar there is no season called "Ordinary Time." We are constantly looking forward to or looking back on the mysteries surrounding Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection.

In the midst of all the distractions and messiness of life, may we always keep Christ and the center, not just at Christmas but every single day of our lives. Merry Christmas.